UNITED NATIONS STAFF UNION

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STATEMENTS BY THE SECRETARY-GENERAL AND THE PRESIDENT OF THE STAFF COMMITTEE ON STAFF DAY - 11 SEPTEMBER 1992

The Secretary-General

Before beginning, I would like us to observe a moment of silence in memory of our seven colleagues who this year have tragically given their lives in the service of peace and humanity.

When I first addressed you last January, I stressed that the safety and security of staff was a matter of the greatest importance to me personally. I have been closely following developments which have a bearing on the security of international civil servants, both in the peace-keeping operations and in established duty stations. It is a matter which is dear to my heart.

I have made it clear to Member States that, unless security is ensured, staff will not be able to fulfil their duties and the missions entrusted to the Organization may be jeopardized. I wish to stress that I will continue to do my utmost to ensure safety of all staff.

I am also making every possible effort to obtain the release of colleagues who are either detained or imprisoned in violation of the Convention on Privileges and Immunities.

Since I took office, I have been impressed by your dedication, skills and versatility. In the course of this year, you have responded to a myriad of new challenges. Many of you have assumed new or additional functions or volunteered for mission service at short notice, often in hardship and dangerous situations in the interest of building a new society, ensuring the fairness of an electoral process or facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

At Headquarters, you are responding on a 24-hour basis to the constant requirements of complex operations in many time zones, servicing double or triple the number of meetings, producing increasing volumes of documentation with shorter and shorter deadlines, as well as researching and providing policy options in a rapidly changing world where long-established modes of thinking and acting are constantly being questioned or redefined.

Others among you are managing increasingly complex multimillion-dollar operations and tens of thousands of military and civilian personnel in the field, in a situation of financial uncertainty.

I intend to bring this to the attention of Governments in my annual report to be issued next week. I will also stress strongly that the restructuring process must be accompanied by a deeper appreciation of, and respect for, the international civil service.

I am fully aware that the process of restructuring and change is an unsettling one. This is particularly so at a time when substantially increased demands are being made on you. I want you to know that I am counting on you to cope with the difficulties inherent in this time of transition. I see here a unique opportunity to build a stronger, more independent Secretariat where the best traditions of public service are combined with modern management practices.

Changing structures must be accompanied by new ways of thinking and working. I am committed to eliminating unnecessary bureaucratic levels, reducing duplication and using the human and financial resources at my disposal in the most efficient, responsible and transparent manner possible. I believe that you have demonstrated that you share my aspirations and are rising to the challenge to make the Organization the most efficient instrument for peace and development.

A more effective and efficient Secretariat means clearer and more direct lines of responsibility, the capacity to deploy staff and resources where they are most needed, and the ability to respond flexibly to new requests and changing mandates. I believe that a Secretariat with a streamlined structure, clearly delineated responsibilities and managerial accountability, will not only be able to provide better and more integrated assistance to Member States, but also result in greater job satisfaction for all.

Some of you have seen newspaper accounts of an interview that I gave recently in London. I would like to take this opportunity to explain that when I referred to the abolition of posts and staff reductions, I was referring only to top-echelon posts. I cannot emphasize too strongly that while there may well be considerable redeployment, staff at other levels are in no danger of losing their employment with the United Nations as a result of the restructuring exercise.

Once the first phase of restructuring has been completed, I intend to focus attention on improvement of conditions of service, including salaries, long-term recruitment policies, grade structure and career development opportunities for all categories of staff.

It is totally unacceptable to me that some staff members receive national subsidies to support their emoluments. I want to do everything in my power to avoid politicization of the Secretariat, to resist outside pressures which favour a few at the expense of the majority, and to give proper recognition to the contributions and talents of many who may not have received equal attention in the past, including women in all parts of the Organization.

Never before has the United Nations been so active and so widely engaged. Never before have there been such great expectations of us. I cannot stress too strongly that the confidence of the international community in the Organization's ability to respond swiftly, effectively and impartially will largely depend on your performance.

Let us, if you will, rise above our individual circumstances; let us take a more detached look at today's world, and above all at the role that can be played in it by the United Nations, that is to say, in large measure, by ourselves.

I am well aware that every individual, every specific situation, has his or its own needs. I know and respect that. But I know as well that our profession is, more than any other, one of direct service to the world, and that it is therefore in direct touch with the transformations taking place there.

Let us look the world in the face. The new developments we have continually been witnessing over the years have a direct impact on our lives. The trust placed in us by the community of nations makes exacting demands on us: to betray that trust would be to deliver the world over to terrible dangers which nothing would any more be capable of averting. Such is the nature of our collective responsibility. That is why we absolutely must achieve an unrivalled degree of organization, competence and rapidity if we wish to be equal to this responsibility which the world is today entrusting to us as it had never done before to any international organization.

For decades, for political reasons of which you are all aware, the Organization was merely going slowly. One might even say that it was largely paralysed in what was the heart of its activity. By the force of events, a routine had become established. Habits evolved of their own accord. There was a need to find administrative arrangements. Now, the time has come to review these arrangements. We need today to change gear, to become a real force. A force which counts in the world -- and if possible, an irresistible force. All of our efforts, our most humble everyday efforts, like the intellectual effort we have to make constantly to see things as a whole, all our efforts, I say, must be directed towards one end: creating a team so effective that, in a few years, the world Organization will be able to surpass itself, to meet the expectations the world has placed in it, to discharge to the full its original mission.

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The United Nations has one wealth: you. One might, thinking of our Organization, paraphrase the philosopher Jean Bodin and say that for us, there is no wealth other than men and women. It would thus be absurd, I repeat, to interfere with the interests of the United Nations staff and the development of their careers. That would be to destroy the Organization itself. Through experience and from conviction, I know that an organization's greatest wealth lies in the men and women who work within it.

The fundamental values we serve call for an all the more genuine investment on the part of the Members of the United Nations because these values and these objectives are lofty and difficult: it is with this real challenge in mind that I have made the changes of which you are aware. I beg you to see in them only a concern to improve the conditions and the effectiveness of our activity. The United Nations is a complex instrument, with the defects inherent in any complex mechanism. But it is not an instrument like the rest. More than any other, we need to give it what the Romans called anima, that is at one and the same time, a soul, the breath of life, vitality.

No doubt it is not always easy to see in the conduct of routine tasks the step by step accomplishment of a design of peace and universal community. No doubt it is not always easy to maintain one's faith and enthusiasm when the level of the tasks to be performed is increasing from day to day.

There is an opportunity for all of us here. Our lives are bound up with the greatest cause of all: working for a world at peace, in other words a world of justice, of development, of cooperation, of dialogue among nations, a world in which the inevitable disputes are settled, in so far as is possible, by peaceful means and not through violence.

I think that when we entered our Organization, we all made ourselves a promise, more or less consciously, more or less explicitly. That promise was to take part in the great work against violence, in all its forms and for peace, in all its forms. I think each one of us made this promise, in different ways, for we all have our own words, especially when we are talking to ourselves. Let us not forget, let us never forget our promise, our great cause -- or we are nothing. Because they are noble, they are exacting. We owe it to others, and we owe it as well to ourselves: that is the full meaning of a the word responsibility. Let us, all of us, remain equal to this challenge.

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President of the Staff Committee

Mr. Secretary General, Dear Colleagues,

Staff day is meant to be a festive occasion, and the oldtimers among us may still remember it as such -- a day on which we could all look back upon the past year with serenity, gathering strength for the strenuous period of the General Assembly which lies just ahead.

Unfortunately, this year -- and for some time now -- there has been little for any of us to be serene about. In fact, as has been noted in many quarters, staff morale has rarely ever been as low as it is now, and while I have no mandate to speak for staff in other major duty stations, I am aware that this mood spread well beyond New York. At first, this may seem surprising: One could well understand that our morale should have been low a decade or so ago, when the relevance if not the very existence of the United Nations was very much in doubt. But why should it be so to-day, when one cannot open a newspaper or listen to a newscast without having the Organization mentioned in a prominent manner, and when it appears at long last to be on the brink of achieving its noble purpose?

Clearly, much of the blame for this situation rest with the attitude of Member States. By volunteering in increasing numbers for peacekeeping and peacemaking missions around the globe, which often involve hardship and danger -- or by accepting, at Headquarters, to shoulder the additional workload of those who have gone, the staff have demonstrated the depth of their commitment to the United Nations. One would expect this commitment to be properly recognized and reciprocated by Member States. Yet, paradoxically, the more they ask of us, the less they seem to be willing to do in return. The failure of many of them to meet their financial obligation has reached scandalous proportions, and as long as this situation persists, their cries for more cost-effectiveness ring very hollow indeed. No organization which is continuously on the verge of bankruptcy can be managed efficiently.

Moreover, not all Member States pay due regard to the need for security and independence of international civil servants. Some continue to detain staff members without due process for extended periods of time, in clear violation of their obligations as regards privileges and immunities. To add to the gravity of such situations, the conditions of detention are often appalling and even torture is not unknown. We have among us to-day a victim of this unspeakable practice, Mr. Tesfamarian Zeggai, an ECA colleague, who as a

result of long imprisonment and ill treatment has lost his eyesight. To us, he is a symbol of what is wrong, but also a symbol of the efforts deployed both by the Secretary-General and the Staff Union in favor of his release. I ask him to stand up and be recognized. Let it be known that we will not rest until the last detainee is out of prison, for as long as one of us is detained, none of us are free.

Other Member States continue to make supplementary payments to their own nationals -- a practice that the Secretary-General himself has in the strongest term denounced as illegal -- while resisting the restoration of Professional pay and pensions to 1984 levels.

Worse still, rather than repair the damage done to that category, some are now attempting to cut salaries and pensions of the staff in the General Service and related categories, who, as a group, are already less well off, and we regret that the International Civil Service Commission should have accepted to become their instrument. We will not stand for all this, and we have already demonstrated our resolve to act in defense of our interest. Should stronger action be called for, let no one doubt that it will be forthcoming. Moreover, we have learned our lesson: if one category of staff is under attack, we are all under attack, and we will resist together. In our unity lies our strength.

All this is something which, regrettably, we by now have come to expect. What we did not expect is that the Secretariat could one day run the danger of being undermined from within, yet this seems to have been exactly the effect so far, if not of the restructuring exercise as such, at least of the manner of its implementation. Let me restate our position: The staff are not opposed in principle to measures designed to improve the effectiveness of the Secretariat. We also recognize change often meets resistance simply because it is change, but if the purpose of the change is explained, and if those affected are involved, so that they can see for themselves that the change does not come at their expense, such resistance can be substantially lessened. Perestroika may be difficult, but perestroika without glasnost - impossible.

Unfortunately, in the present case, information and explanation have been quite insufficient. It is true that at the request of the Staff Committee, information has been provided, and this has been relayed to our constituents. However, this is no substitute for explanations provided directly by the administration to the staff at large. So far, our request for an information circular on this subject has been resisted, but it is not too late.

In the absence of such direct information, fears can become pervasive -- particularly if they appear to be substantiated by proposals, however tentative, emanating from an outside consultant invited to review the functioning of the largest department in the Organization.

How can the staff concerned not be alarmed when they become aware of specific scenarios for the elimination of hundreds of posts, including calculation of the related cost of termination payments for staff made redundant. It is difficult to reconcile this kind of approach with what we have been told, namely that all that this group is supposed to be doing is to help with the introduction of modern methods of management. Need I add that if staff members are concerned about their future livelihood, it cannot fail to affect their performance.

I am therefore glad that the Secretary-General should, in his own statement, have referred to his recent interview given to a London-based Arabic Language Newspaper and clarified his meaning. I am sure he will understand that, given the overall context I have just described, those among us who have seen it should have been deeply disturbed by what we read, even allowing for problems of translation. We are therefore particularly pleased to note the reiteration of his assurance that apart from top level personnel, no staff member will lose his job as a result of restructuring, and we trust that this principle will be reflected in any and all decisions related to restructuring.

Let me also state that we do not mind having a strong Secretary-General, one who will stand up to Member States when they encroach upon his prerogatives as Chief Administrative Officer. We count on him to protect our legitimate rights and to oppose any deterioration in our conditions of service. We can assure him on our part that our performance will continue to meet the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity called for by the Charter. As already noted, the staff have responded positively to the increasing number of operations undertaken recently without corresponding increase in their numbers, and they have assumed the heavier burden without complaint. Moreover I can assure him that we shall want no part in any outside campaign directed against him.

Mr. Secretary-General,

When you last spoke to us in this hall, my predecessor pledged to you our wholehearted support. The hand of cooperation we then extended to you remains there for you to grasp. We know that your office can be at times a source of frustration, but I do not believe that this frustration is of our making. I can assure you that none of us wish to add to your already heavy burden; on the contrary, we will do whatever we can to lighten it.

Mr. Secretary-General, Dear colleagues,

The new era in the history of the Organization that the Secretary-General has just so eloquently described poses a challenge to us all. Let us confront it together. Many difficulties may still lie ahead, and we will yet be sorely tested; but these difficulties need not be insurmountable. For the common good of the Organization, and, beyond, for the good of the mankind we all serve, let us all be part of a joint effort. We may thus hasten the moment when Staff Day once again becomes an occasion for serenity rather than sadness.

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